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Where The Buck Stops

What happened to Ronald Reagan? How did a commanding President who stood tall with the public and could work his will with Congress allow his Administration to lapse into the evident "chaos" certified by the Tower commission?

Here is a bemused observer's speculation as to the causative chain of events and circumstances:

1. *The Reagan "Management Style."* That's what the commission rather charitably called it — at best, the President's broad-stroke leadership that delegated most responsibility to subordinates; at worst, his inattention to detail and ignorance of facts. To borrow from the "Peter Principle," this style reached its level of incompetence in the Iran-contra affair; as a result, Mr. Reagan seems neither to have understood the implications of what he wanted to do nor to have known the operational details of what his National Security Council actually was doing.

There had been warnings aplenty, from the most penetrating press observers, from David Stockman's insider revelations — but most sharply in events. The misuse of the Marines in Lebanon, the Bitburg cemetery visit, the ill-prepared summit dealings in Iceland, to name only three, all foretold a story of disaster waiting to happen.

2. *The Reaction to the Landslide.* Recent landslides — especially for re-election — have been more threatening to Presidents than colon surgery; witness Franklin Roosevelt and the court-packing scheme, Lyndon Johnson and the war in Vietnam, Richard Nixon and the Watergate "stonewall," now Ronald Rea-

gan and Iran. Landslides seem to suggest to mortal Presidents that perhaps they are something more. They can carry out schemes they would have avoided in more modest circumstances, they have won something approaching absolute power; above all, they needn't be too scrupulous about strict adherence to both-ersome laws.

Pray for the next President, whoever he or she may be, to win by 51 percent of the vote. That sometimes teaches humility. Landslides never do.

3. *The Chief of Staff.* Donald Regan should not bear full blame for the Iran fiasco, nor will his departure restore the President's standing. But it seems inarguable that after Mr. Regan took over the White House staff following the landslide of 1984, things began to deteriorate; and that one strong reason was the chief of staff's watertight control of access to and instruction from the President.

Under that system — congenial to but disastrous for Mr. Reagan's "management style" — the President was kept from hearing sufficient argument, dissent, advice and warning coming up from lower but expert levels; and his often ill-informed instincts and desires — to free American hostages, for example — took on the force of commands coming down from on high. Aside from responsibility for the Iran mess, chief of staff Regan's system obviously failed a President desperately in need of good advice and expert help, rather than imperial isolation.

4. *Secret Operations.* No President can conduct foreign policy entirely in the open; but any President who had studied the C.I.A. hearings of the 1970's should have been wary of "covert operations." Such derring-do seldom if ever has proved worth the risks involved (not in Guatemala, at the Bay of Pigs, in Laos or even in Iran).

Instead, Mr. Reagan let himself be guided by the freewheeling William Casey, a veteran of the O.S.S. in World War II. They plunged once again into the deceptively alluring world of secret operations — mining Nicaraguan harbors, selling arms to the Ayatollah Khomeini's forces — that had been discredited a decade ago.

For at least two reasons, such secret operations are dangerous and usually unproductive. In the nature of the case they do not allow for adequate consultations, discussions and planning; the more closely held a project, the more it tends to be hare-brained and badly prepared. Again in the nature of the case, secret operations are likely to cause Presidents to lie — not just to foreigners but to Americans; then, if caught in the lie, as is all too likely, they may think they have to protect themselves and "the Presidency" with more lies.

For all of the above — as for such other important factors as his succession of second-rate national security advisers — Ronald Reagan ultimately has no one to blame but himself. The buck stops there.